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Several bases for strengthening the language development program in primary grades were considered. From recent studies that have recorded and analyzed actual speech samples of preschool and school children, three assumptions concerning children's language were made. First, by the age of three, most children have learned the basic structure of the language. While they may omit less essential words, they usually include key terms in their statements. Second, by the time they come to school, most children have learned to use most of the structural elements of the language and are beginning to talk in complex sentences. Third, even children from poor backgrounds are not as nonverbal as once was thought. They differ in complexity of language but are not "languageless." In order to provide a stronger program of oral language development, three suggestions were proposed. One suggestion was to broaden the elementary classroom experience, to include more opportunities for talking. A second suggestion was to stimulate fullness in oral responses to questions and discussions, to encourage growth of verbal content. A third suggestion was to guide the thinking of children toward the development of finer shades of meaning and greater precision in language use. A bibliography was included.					
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A PROGRAM FOR POORLY LANGUAGED CHILDREN

by Alexander Frazier

October, 1963

Center for School Experimentation

College of Education

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

Columbus, Ohio

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
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1. New Slants on Children's Language

We used to think many children came to school without much language. They were believed to speak largely in words or phrases. As a result, we thought what we needed to do most of all in language development was encourage children to practice larger language units. "Say it in a complete sentence."

From recent studies that have recorded and analyzed actual speech samples of pre-school and school children (Loban and Strickland for the latter), we are coming to have some new ideas about children's language. Now we believe that:

. . . Even by the age of three, most children have the basic structure of the language fairly well in mind. They may omit some less essential words in their sentences, but they include the key terms in their statements.

. . . By the time they come to school, most children have learned to use most of the structural elements of the language. They do not wait until the third grade to talk in complex sentences.

. . . Even children from poor backgrounds are not as "verbally destitute" as we may once have thought. They differ in complexity of language from children who come out of more favored language backgrounds, and they have other deficiencies of language that need attending to. But they are not as languageless as we once thought.

The new knowledge would seem to indicate that we ought to take another look at our language development program in the primary grades. Perhaps we need to look at its adequacy for all children. Here, however, we are especially interested in improving the program for the children

that we know need to be as fully language as possible if they are to do well in school.

2. What Has Stood in Our Way

We may need to reflect a little on what has kept us from doing as well as we might in the building of a program of language development. One thing we have already discussed. We used to think children could not speak in much more than words or phrases. Often we have asked questions that required only one or two words of reply but may have demanded a full sentence anyway. We have taught children how to say "yes" and "no" with a subject and predicate.

Sometimes we may have asked the kinds of questions that did not require too much talking. The sentence answer was at least more than an answer of merely a word or a phrase. Perhaps, because we limited the size of the problem, we also limited the scope of the program.

We have talked, too, a great deal about the oral language program as something related to audience situations. Children in such situations are often tongue-tied and timid. We have sought to compensate for such normal reactions and conditions by asking children to talk about something familiar (sharing time) or letting them talk from behind a barrier (puppetry) or putting the individual into a team or group setting so that he forgot himself (dramatic play).

Sometimes the oral language was possibly thought of mostly as practice. The more children talk, the better they are at talking. At least, the freer and more fluent they are. What gets talked about or how well it is talked about or toward what end -- these aspects may seem less important than just talking.

In order to insure opportunity for oral language, we have had regular times for it -- Thursdays for sharing time, Mondays for news time, Wednesdays for some other kind of talking time.

Now all these aspects of oral language development or of the oral part of the language arts program may have something to be said for them. At least, much is still being said (see "Children and Oral Language" and Strickland, Guide). However, if we are going to plan a stronger program of language development, we may want to free ourselves of some of the restrictions to the way we think about "talking."

Can we move. . .

- | | |
|--|--|
| . . . from single sentences | to several sentences? |
| . . . from audience situations only | to many kinds of situations for talking? |
| . . . from practice as a main "purpose" | to many specific purposes for talking? |
| . . . from separate periods for attention to oral language | to all-day attention to talking? |

3. Some Bases for Language Development

Let us restate these directions "toward" a new program as three bases for it:

Attention to the oral language development of young children should occur in many different kinds of situations all through the school day.

Every effort should be made to stimulate oral responses toward greater fullness of discourse.

Oral language development should be thought of as the product of thinking things through out loud; that is, elaboration of language comes from the development of finer frameworks of meanings (Frazier, 1962).

We may discuss the program implications of the guidelines under these headings: identifying oral language opportunities in the regular program, stimulating fuller discourse, and guiding the process of thinking out loud.

Identifying Oral Language Opportunities

Perhaps the first thing we need to understand is that we are not advocating doing away with the oral aspect of the formal language arts program. Oral interpretation in general reading, the reading of poetry, choral reading, dramatization, report giving, and the development of listening skills -- these are all matters for continued emphasis.

But we are also asking that many other opportunities for oral experience be recognized and taken full advantage of toward the end of better language development.

Such occasions are many, of course, and perhaps all we really need to do here is to remind ourselves of their variety and multiplicity:

General area

Before school activities

Opening of school activities

Reading

Mathematics

Sample experiences

Talking with the teacher
Talking together in the science corner
Holding a committee meeting

Planning for the day
Making committee reports
Talking over needed new rules

Anticipating what is to be found in new reading selection
Discussing selection under study
Reporting on personal or independent reading

Recounting way solution to problem has been reached
Posing story problems

Reading aloud (by teacher)

Recounting past episodes in story
Commenting on related personal experiences
Asking questions about what has been read

Social studies

Reacting to content of group experience (study trip, film showing, reading, etc.)
Contributing from personal experience including reading
Developing framework in group for needed learnings

Art

Discussing paintings exhibited by self or others
Planning for the use of materials

Science

Planning steps in experimentation
Noting results for recording on chart

Again, this list of sample activities is meant simply as a reminder of the richness of opportunity for purposeful oral experiences to be found in our daily program. Their nature will differ, depending upon the grade; the foregoing list is less applicable to the kindergarten than to the other early grades. But perhaps it may stand as it is to help us remember that opportunities for oral language development are available to us all day long. In fact, we cannot teach young children successfully without making good use of such experiences.

The first requisite, then, of a more consciously developed program of oral language is to make sure that we are aware of and making use of as many of the opportunities we already have in the regular instructional program.

Stimulating Fuller Discourse

A broad base for the oral language program is to be found in the many opportunities and needs there are to elicit verbal responses from

...that can encourage fuller oral response. Sometimes we may limit the amount of language without intending to do so.

Here are some of the ways we can and do try to stimulate fuller oral response:

Balancing fact with thought questions. We do want to know whether the class is understanding what they are studying; answers to questions of fact are an important way of checking quickly to find out. But we can also go beyond the questions that require only brief answers by asking "how" and "why" as well as "what."

Questioning to elicit further response. Sometimes children have trouble in telling what they do know. But questions asked either by the teacher or by other children can help in bringing out more information or ideas.

Posing problems or activities that require discussion and interaction. Particularly in social studies and science, we may plan to set up situations that involve children in working together in getting the information and ideas about a topic or question or problem large enough to require more elaborate reporting by one or several pupils.

Watching for and valuing non-solicited contributions. Quite often one response will stimulate another pupil to offer additional suggestions. The rush of the busy day will not always allow us to pursue these offers. But to the extent that time permits, such contributions may add useful new content if we can accept them patiently and find their relevance to whatever is at hand.

Challenging the imagination. The deliberate attempt to excite the creative imagination of children often pays off in surprising ways:

"What do you think would happen if. . . ?" "We are going to visit. . .

What do you think we will see first?"

Calling on out-of-school or personal experience. Sharing does not have to be confined to Thursday afternoons. We can elicit the experiences of children we know have been some place or read something or talked before about something related to the question presently under discussion.

These are but a few of the many ways we build out the content of oral language during the day's work. Of course, we cannot use all of these in everything we are studying. If we tried to do so, we would find ourselves still dealing with the reading lesson at the end of the morning.

But we can choose every day to build out some of our regular work so that there will be something more in the way of oral language to deal with than we would get simply by asking for "answers."

Guiding the Process of Thinking Out Loud

In trying to broaden the base for a stronger program of language development, we may succeed in becoming more aware of the many opportunities for talking that exist in our everyday activities of learning. We may become increasingly ingenious in stimulating fuller oral response. But the question will remain: Toward what end? We are certainly interested in more than just talking.

The answer lies, of course, in what we want to do with the content of discussion. In our program, we assume that children are engaging in

purposeful talking. They are telling us what they know or think about whatever is under discussion. We need the oral content to check on their understanding and to guide them further in their learning. With young children, we depend heavily on oral response to help us judge how effectively we are teaching and how well they are learning.

But as we have been laying out our purposes in language development, we find that we want to go beyond assessing the state of children's learning. We expect to use the content of what is being said as material for further learning and language development.

Naturally, we do so all the time. We are not satisfied simply to test what children know. We amend and extend and push the thinking ahead as we guide discussion in our classrooms. Thinking out loud is the process. The product is finer frameworks of meaning that are expressed through greater specificity and precision of language.

As far as guiding the process of thinking things through is concerned, we may find it useful to keep in mind some such analysis of the steps in thinking as this (Frazier, 1962: 9):

Relating items: Linking one item of learning to another in terms of similarities or differences.

Generalizing: Setting up categories or making generalizations from observed relationships among items.

Classifying: Placing new items of experience in categories or under generalizations already set up.

Modifying: Enlarging categories and generalizations to accommodate new items or events.

Or we may wish to think of the language outcomes that we are after strictly in terms of language. We are seeking greater discrimination in use of language. The simplest signs of growing complexity are to be

found in increased vocabulary and in greater use of varied structures for modification of meaning.

One language expert (Christensen) contends that the process of composition is essentially that of addition. The noun and verb and main clause of a sentence are merely its bare bones. Meaning really comes as modifiers are added. He classifies these as of three kinds (College English: 13):

1. Words that point up qualities or attributes
2. Words that specify parts or details
3. Words that offer comparisons or likenesses

Whether we approach our task through sharpening the thinking of children or attending directly to the nature of their language, we are working both for finer shades of meaning and greater specificity of language.

4. By Way of Summary

The bases that have been proposed here for a stronger program of oral language development are these:

Broadening the base to include the many chances to work on language development that we have before us all day long

Stimulating fullness of oral response so that we will have more verbal content to work with in our language development program

Guiding thinking things through aloud toward the development of finer shades of meaning and consequently of greater precision in language use

These would seem to be simple steps to take. And in our discussion here, we have said very little about thinking of these bases as being better for some children than for others. Actually we might agree that what we are talking about are the bases for any good program of oral language development.

But we are especially interested in the needs of the less well languaged child. Some children may get a great deal of the help they need to work their experience through in language terms at home. These less favored children need our help more.

How can we best keep track of what we do this year so that we can share our insights and skills with other teachers?

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